

Remap sets up fights to keep jobs

*Incumbents likely
to face each other*

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BATON ROUGE — In the early angling of the Legislature's redistricting session, a handful of lawmakers are scrambling to avoid having to run against a colleague in the fall elections. The outcome of the scuffles almost certainly will affect the distribution of seats — and influence — between Orleans and Jefferson parishes.

The 2010 census figures, which confirmed significant population losses in Gentilly and east of the Industrial Canal, almost guaranteed head-to-head battles involving Democrats in eastern New Orleans: Cynthia Willard-Lewis and J.P. Morrell in the Senate, Wesley Bishop and Charmaine Marchand Stiaes in the House.

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Districts span parishes

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But Speaker Jim Tucker's proposed House map also pits two incumbent Republicans in a district that would span the 17th Street Canal to group parts of Metairie with Lakeview.

Rep. John LaBruzzo of Metairie let it be known Monday that he is unhappy with a plan that would set him up for a campaign against Rep. Nick Lorusso, who resides in Lake Vista. LaBruzzo said his displeasure is not about his own political fortunes, but rooted in his desire to protect Metairie. "I've got to be fair to my district, to my constituents," he said.

Lorusso has said for months that he knew his district would be substantially altered, and he has embraced the possibility of representing Jefferson Parish voters, but he confirmed Monday that he is participating in negotiations.

Tucker said that he is exploring other options, and he was expected to meet with Lorusso, LaBruzzo and others into the evening Monday. But the speaker noted that the domino effects of any changes would reach surrounding districts, potentially including majority African-American districts in Orleans Parish. Tucker said he will not redraw the map in a way that reduces the 29 majority non-white districts he has proposed. In fact, the Legislative Black Caucus is seeking a 30th majority non-white district in Shreveport.

And even if Tucker can navigate the demographics, clearing a path for LaBruzzo and Lorusso means drawing a district nearby that will simply give two more incumbents the same problem. The most likely candidates, it appears, would be Reps. Neil Abramson, Walt Leger and Helena Moreno, all Democrats. In the latest Tucker plan, those three representatives each would have single districts that combine to span the Mississippi River crescent south of Lakeview and Gentilly.

"We're still going to have 19 districts on the south shore" of Lake Pontchartrain, with 20 members wanting another term, Tucker said.

The conundrum makes plain the role that political self-preservation plays in a legislative exercise that allows lawmakers to redraw districts ahead of the next election. And it highlights how racial demographics influence the process, given that the U.S. Justice Department will review Louisiana's maps to gauge whether they include "discriminatory intent" or "discriminatory effect."

Tucker, a Republican, also must balance partisan considerations. He thus far has avoided a severe backlash from Democrats, but the Lorusso-LaBruzzo district is the only one of three head-to-heads involving Republicans. The third would pit Rep. Chris Roy, D-Alexandria, against Rep. James Armes, D-Leesville. Protecting Lorusso and LaBruzzo at the expense of New Orleans Democrats, who already are certain to see their numbers diminished, could end any hope of bipartisan tranquility.

LaBruzzo's efforts come in contrast to Tucker and other New Orleans-area lawmakers who have framed the 2011 redistricting effort as a way to "regionalize" the area delegation.

"We have to consider the shifting populations between Orleans and Jefferson," Tucker said. "I think we have to learn that cross-parish districts are not a bad thing. ... In the New Orleans region over the last several years we have become much more of a regional delegation" already.

Tucker, who is term-limited in his district that spans Orleans and Jefferson on the West Bank, noted that the Metairie-Lakeview district would not reduce the number of legislators who represent Jefferson Parish; it would only reduce the number of districts contained entirely within the parish. Tucker's proposal calls for a district with 23,513 Orleans residents and 20,952 Jefferson residents, a balance that could make a candidate from either parish viable.

Late Monday, LaBruzzo said he thinks a resolution of his potential head-to-head with the Lorusso "is close." He would not elaborate.

The speaker added later Monday that, even as he entertains changes, time is running out in the three-week session that must end by April 13. The House redistricting committee is expected to take up the map again Wednesday. He said he wants the bill on the House floor by Friday. There, he told members, "I don't expect to have any substantive amendments."

The disputes in eastern New Orleans have not spilled into public view, if they exist at all.

Tucker said the battle between Stiaes and Bishop "can't be fixed" as of now. Stiaes and Bishop have said previously that their constituents have said in public forums that they prefer to be grouped together to maintain at least two House seats based east of the Industrial Canal. Any changes, Bishop noted, would simply move him into a district with Rep. Austin Badon.

Among senators, Morrell, a Gentilly resident, said he was not surprised to be included in a district with Willard-Lewis, both African-American Democrats. The proposed district includes most of eastern New Orleans, parts of Gentilly, part of Chalmette and part of the west bank in Orleans and Jefferson. Willard-Lewis did not respond to a request for comment.

"Am I happy with my district?" Morell said. "No. It's redistricting. I don't know anyone in the New Orleans delegation that's happy" when considering the coming elections. "All of us would have areas where we have never campaigned before, and that's a scary proposition for any politician," he said. An example for Morrell and Willard-Lewis: the 20,000 voters in majority white, conservative St. Bernard Parish.

But, Morrell said, those analyses are purely centered on an incumbent. "Does the plan, as I see it, do what we need to do to maximize minority influence" as required by federal law "and does it maximize the number of legislators who will be representing some part of Orleans Parish? Absolutely."

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